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ABSTRACT

Joyce Carol Oates is unique in American fiction for her portrayals of the terror and the beauty in the mother-daughter relationship--the tensions and the bonds created by this particular form of doubling. Her more interesting explorations portraying some deeply pathological and some positive aspects of this form of doubling include the following: (1) a mother's inability to face a daughter's hostility and independence, in the short story "The Children": (2) a daughter's debilitating perception of herself as an extension of her mother, in the short story "Matter and Energy": (3) a reconciling recognition of identity by a mother, in the short story "Year of Wonders": and (4) the gamut of feelings in a mother-daughter relation, its sustaining aspects as well as its tensions, in the novel "Childwold." Studying these stories in the order of their first publication suggests a possible pattern of progression. (RL)

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Mothers and Daughters in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates: The Terror and Beauty of Doubling

Joyce Carol Oates is unique in American fiction for her portrayals of the terror and the beauty in the mother-daughter relationship--the tensions and the bonds created by this particular form of doubling. Nancy Milford, when she was on a panel of women writers in 1973, stated that "one's notion of one's mother and the feelings that shoot back and forth between generations, have never been fully probed in fiction."[1] Oates does, however, probe these notions and feelings, and she does so with sensitivity and with a perceptiveness that especially impresses those who have read the psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow's explanations of the mother-daughter relationship in The Reproduction of Mothering, published in 1978.

Although several of Oates' works depict rather stereotypical mother-daughter relations,[2] her more interesting explorations portray some deeply pathological and some positive aspects of this form of doubling. There are: 1) a mother's inability to face a girl child's hostility and independence, in "The Children" in Marriages and Infidelities; 2) a daughter's debilitating perception of herself as an extension of her mother, in "Matter and Energy" in The Wheel of Love; 3) a reconciling recognition of identity by a mother, in "Year of Wonders" in The Seduction and Other Stories; and 4) the gamut of feelings in a mother-daughter relation, its sustaining aspects as well as its tensions, in Childwold. I shall discuss these examples in the order of their first publication because they

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suggest a possible pattern of progression.

"The Children" (1969) is a moving, shocking portrayal of a mother's failure to accept separation from her daughter. It is told from the mother's perspective because, as Oates states: "The story is about the girl, Ginny, revealed to her through children."[3]

Ginny, a graduate student in chemical research, marries a fellow graduate student, gives up her career and has a baby girl, Rachel. She has fears that she will fail as a mother: "It was difficult for her to understand that she was an adult, that she was married and had a baby. Rachel seemed to her a delicate, exquisite creature . . . . There were times when Ginny felt inept and ugly beside her own child, though of course this was nonsense" (p. 186). Most of the time Ginny enjoys the little girl's good looks and her friends. Then, after a move to a new neighborhood and another baby, tensions between mother and daughter begin. Rachel says that she doesn't like her baby brother and, worse yet, says to Ginny: "'You're a bad mommy and I hate you.'" Ginny retaliates: "'You're a bad little girl.'" "She felt so weak, so strangely vulnerable herself, that it occurred to her suddenly that a life of this kind was no good, not worth living" (p. 194).

The incident is soon forgotten, but Rachel becomes increasingly irritating. She insists on having secrets from her mother, and Ginny wonders "why it was so hard for her, now, to love her daughter" (pp. 197-198). Then Rachel hits the baby. Ginny feels "a rage she could hardly understand" (p. 198), and when she naps with him she dreams of wild dogs setting upon her and the children. She thinks: "The children had a language of their own and secrets of their own. Once they had played near her, with no secrets, but now they ran like wild creatures . . . ."

She is obsessed by "her vision of Rachel, of the terrible secrets the girl had and of the hurt she wanted to do to her brother" (p. 199), and she begins to spank, then to beat her daughter.

> She could feel her bones beneath her skin, the fine delicate bones that were an outrage to Ginny, so perfect were they, so finely structured to last that lifetime, a lifetime that had taken itself out of Ginny and would run and run away from her and never come back, stinking with the mud of great distances and beyond all the range of Ginny's voice. (pp. 199-200)

When the husband returns and rescues the child, the story ends with Ginny pushing him away and crying, "'Oh, you don't know! What do you know about it? What the hell do you know?'" (p. 200)

"The Children" is a powerful portrayal of what psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow describes in The Reproduction of Mothering as a "disruption in mother-child empathy that occurs when mothers who had originally formed (or seemed to have formed) an appropriate unity with their infant were then unable to give it up."[4] Ginny is also a poignant fictional parallel of a case that psychoanalyst Enid Balint described, in which the mother "could not bear unhappiness or violence . . . in her child . . . . What was missing . . . was the acceptance that there might be bad things . . . which must be recognized; . . . moreover, that the child was neither identical with her mother, nor with what the mother wanted her to be."[5] The story depicts with deep understanding the irrational violence that builds up in a sensitive, intelligent young woman who is expected to move effortlessly into motherhood and to cope with the difficult task of accepting a daughter as an independent individual. Oates makes it explicit

that this is a mother-daughter matter, from her first comment that Ginny and Rachel ignored the father because he was "so far from their own world'" and Ginny's insistence to him: "'You don't understand'" (p. 197), to the last words of the story: "'What the hell do you know?'" (p. 200).

"Matter and Energy" (1969) portrays a daughter's inability to separate herself from her mother, as a result of her mother's rejection of her at a critical period. The time shifts back and forth from 1956, when the daughter is twelve and her father has left her mother, to 1969, when she is twenty-five, with a job and a lover, and her mother is in a mental hospital. The 1956-1958 sections and the daughter's memories of those years reveal the mother's emotional collapse after her husband's desertion. She hid behind the furnace in the basement, instead of making a home for her daughter, and finally tried to kill herself, which the daughter felt as a rejection. Psychoanalyst Alice Balint points out that "the child's unappeased love for her [mother may] prevent the requisite loosening of the bond between them,"[6] and Oates portrays this pathology. Just before the daughter finds her mother in her suicide attempt she reports: "I feel her silence on the other side of the door, her body, like my body, inert, waiting,"[7] and, in a similar identification, "I want to go down behind the furnace and lie on the dirty floor, press myself against the floor, try to get through. My mother used to lie on the floor, trying to get through it" (p. 298). The feeling of rejection and bitterness also persists. When she visits her mother in the hospital she reports: "she won't kiss me," then adds, "I don't want her to kiss me anyway!" (p. 299).

As a woman of twenty-five, with a lover and a responsible position in a television studio, she tries to convince herself that the relationship is stable: "Here we sit, mother and daughter. We have come to rest" (p. 301). Yet she wants to cry out: "Why don't you let me go?" (p. 301). She is

haunted by the memory that her mother threw a flour canister at her when she was fourteen, and when she hears about the nice girls who sang to the hospital patients, she thinks: "And you loved them! You loved them, but when I was that age you tried to kill me!" (p. 303). She interprets the mother's wish to see her married as "seeking to expel me from her forever. She wants to squeeze my head down out of her body--she wants me to leave her, to be born . . . to wrap my arms and legs about a man, a stranger . . . . Oh, she is hateful, she wants me dead!" (pp. 304-305). Because she is convinced: "She didn't want to be my mother!" she relives a time before the mother could reject her: "I can feel the gentle pores of my skin breathing as if in memory of their breathing twenty-five years ago, inside her body . . . the two of us one body, the same matter" (pp. 309-310). At the story's end she realizes that even with her lover she is "like a daughter, emptied of everything except obedience" (p. 312), and she sees her life as symbolized by the buds on a weed he picks for her--"bloodless, tiny, tight, turned in upon themselves" (p. 313).

Although Oates shows that the mother also suffers from the abnormal bond, the power of the story lies in the portrayal of the pathological effects upon the daughter. It is the gripping self-disclosure of a young woman who feels that she continues to be her mother's double and extension and so cannot enter into other meaningful relationships.

"Year of Wonders" (1974), which portrays the recognition of doubling as an epiphany, is a refreshing departure from pathological mother-daughter relationships.

The central incident is the sketching of the daughter Doreen by a young man who has set himself up in a mall which Doreen frequents. Through this incident Oates weaves the motif of the daughter's recurrent thoughts

of her mother, which leads to the story's climax and explains the title. "I would give the drawing to my mother. I would write Love, Doreen on it and give it to her"[8] appears with variations three times. At the end, before Doreen actually offers the drawing, she experiences great anxiety, implicitly paralleled with the artist's nervousness over Doreen's response to his likeness. She wonders: will her mother be home? how will she react? This is for Doreen a "year of wonders," however. The mother exclaims: "'Why, this is a present for me, it's you giving yourself back to me . . . but you look just like me. . . .'" Then, while Doreen stands shaking and afraid that "she might get mad or rip it up," the mother adds, in the last words of the story: "'Thank you, Doreen'" (p. 201).

Oates has thus provided a moving account of a period in an anxious adolescent girl's life, in which the mother's recognition of the daughter as double comes as an epiphany that dispels the tension between them.

The novel Childwold (1976) depicts the mother-daughter relationship more fully than do any of Oates' earlier works, except Do With Me What You Will, and more positively. She goes beyond her earlier explorations to indicate the sources of the ambivalent feelings of hate and love, and both the mother's and daughter's awareness of them.

Oates describes the mother Arlene's reaction when she learns that her daughter Laney has been with a man: "Only fourteen? But she had to remember, had to force herself to remember, that she herself had been married at the age of fifteen and had had her first baby by the age of sixteen . . . ."[9] So she understands intellectually that her daughter is maturing, but emotionally she cannot accept Laney as a woman because she cannot give up the image of "a child of ten or eleven, holding a kitten in her arms and grinning into the camera. That was the Laney

Arlene knew" (p. 86). The daughter's room is warm and inviting to her, providing the continued identification she seeks: "Arlene would have liked to sleep here herself. Would have liked to crawl under the heavy quilted covers with her daughter . . . and sleep . . ." (p. 87). Later she picks up a book of Laney's which compels the bitter recognition of separation.

> She closed the book and handed it back to Laney, who took it from her in silence, and their eyes brushed each other, and in that instant Arlene felt that she would never be young again: not only would Laney outlive her, and live a life she could not control, but Laney was already grown from her, slipped far from her, beyond Childwold. Her daughter! She was reading this book . . . and Arlene could not follow her into it--could not understand, could not share. She was angry. She was hurt. She saw Laney as a stranger might see her . . . (p. 89)

Laney also wished to retreat from life back to her mother. After rejecting her mother's sympathy when she is menstruating, she reflects back on "Last summer of childhood . . . bare heels and toes, sleep, let me childhide, Momma draws the covers up, Momma is singing, lovehide, lovewild . . ." (p. 198). She too resented the inevitable separation: "Momma loves the little ones best" (p. 77). On the other hand, she also fought for and won her independence, her right to go out with an older man.

Oates develops the relationship as one that withstands the strain of the daughter's individuation, with its accompanying tensions and resentments. Arlene does not react violently, as Ginny does in "The Children." Laney, although she is disgusted with her mother when she finds her drunk

after her lover beat her, counters her negative reaction with positive images:

> She had ironed that dress just the other day, you'd been in the kitchen with her, talking. Talking about nothing important. The kitchen was warm and nice . . . and Momma was ironing the dress carefully . . . she sprinkled water on it from the Coke bottle you'd painted bright red years ago at the Childwold grammar school, to give her as a Christmas present . . . . The two of you had talked and laughed together . . . . You laughed together, you laughed. (pp. 102-103)

Even when Laney lives in town so she can go to school there, she feels close to her mother. She often telephones her before school or during the noon hour; and Oates indicates her mixed anxiety and joy when she comes home for the weekend: "Momma, you cry, running up the driveway from the road on Friday afternoon, is everything all right? It's all right, isn't it?" (p. 239). Finally, after Laney has been told that the man who loves both daughter and mother in different ways has killed the mother's former lover, she recalls hearing words that are unidentified, but clearly her mother's: "Isn't it all right, Laney? Don't cry, don't cry . . . , Look, honey: we'll be all right. Haven't we always . . . ?" (p. 285).

Neither the mother nor the daughter denies the separation. Each has her life, and the last scenes of the novel are between Laney and her lover. This is the picture of a mother and daughter who have recognized, however painfully, their separate individuality, yet continue to experience a deep emotional bond--a rare phenomenon in fictional portrayals.

Oates' fiction thus shows an increasingly probing exploration of the

complexities--the terror and the beauty--of the mother-daughter relationship. She portrays the pathology of the mother who cannot separate herself from her daughter and accept her secretiveness, her hostilities. She depicts a daughter whose mother's neurotic behavior traps the daughter in a nightmare of obsessive identification and hate. Then, in a later story, she shifts her perspective to describe a mother's pleased and reassuring recognition of identity with a daughter who yearns for approval. And in Childwold she provides a spectrum of the beauty as well as the pain in the relationship. Going beyond the somewhat stereotypical portrayal in Do With Me What You Will, she has enriched contemporary fiction with insights into the satisfactions as well as the dangers in this most deeply rooted form of doubling.

Notes

[1] Constance Ayers Denne and Katharine M. Rogers, Moderators, "Women Novelists: A Distinct Group?", Women Studies, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1975), p. 25.

[2] "The Daughter," "A Girl at the Edge of the Ocean," "A Premature Autobiography" and "Honeybit" in The Goddess and Other Women have a mother who is completely unsympathetic, presented through the perception of a daughter who dislikes and or resents her mother, and Do With Me What You Will characterizes the mother as manipulative and totally self-centered.

[3] "The Children," in Marriages and Infidelities (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1973), p. 184. All further references to this work appear in the text. "The Children" was first published in The Transatlantic Review, January 1969.

[4] The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978), p. 101. This quotation paraphrases a study by Christine Olden, "Notes on the Development of Empathy," The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, XIII (1958), 505-518, and it pinpoints the situation Oates depicts more precisely than the more detailed discussion in the original study.

[5] Chodorow, p. 101, quoting Enid Balint, "On Being Empty of Oneself," International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 44 #4 (1963), 476.

[6] Chodorow, p. 135, quoting Alice Balint, The Early Years of Life: A Psychoanalytic Study (New York: Basic Books, 1954), p. 90.

[7] "Matter and Energy," in The Wheel of Love (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1972), p. 297. All further references to this work appear in the text. "Matter and Energy" was first published in Partisan Review, Volume 36, 1969.

[8] "Year of Wonders," in The Seduction & Other Stories (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), p. 198. All further references to this work appear in the text. "Year of Wonders" first appeared in a collection of stories Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? published by Fawcett in 1974.

[9] Childwold (New York: Vanguard, 1976), p. 83. All further references to this work appear in the text.